Politics

JAMES K. W. ATHERTON/WASHINGTON POST

Blakey: They're revolting

No news is no news

House Assassination Committee: Internecine Bitterness Seen

By the time you read this, the House Select Committee on Assassinations should have issued its latest report in the continuing investigation into the murders of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King. If you've missed it, don't worry. It won't tell you anything you don't already know—the Feds still don't know who done it.

The real news is that the committee's chief counsel, G. Robert Blakey, prompted revolt among his staff, partially crippling its effectiveness. He has taken the almost unprecedented step of returning $425,000 to the United States Treasury—money that was to have financed the investigation—despite the rife unhappiness of staff members who charge that the investigation has pulled some punches for want of funds. (Blakey supporters contend that the committee was slow in getting started in 1977 and will spend its entire $5 million allotment by the end of this year.)

Blakey's behavior has made him nearly as controversial as Lee Harvey Oswald among his own staff. Shortly after taking over from former chief counsel Richard Sprague, Blakey required all remaining staff members to sign agreements forbidding them from even acknowledging their employment by the committee without permission, and to disclose immediately any outside inquiry. Violation of the agreement threatens a $5,000 fine and dismissal. Blakey also circulated guidelines: "Do not conduct interviews in your hotel room with a member of the opposite sex . . . do not discuss or get involved in political or controversial topics with anyone."

Blakey has been as cozy with the CIA and FBI as he has been Draconian with his staff. Several staff members have either been fired or talked into resigning because the FBI would not clear them, often for unstated or ambiguous reasons. Other staffers, who are still pending CIA clearance, have not been allowed any access to classified material. And those who are allowed to read CIA documents, staffers charge, must submit any notes they make to the CIA for review. Blakey, who has refused to call former CIA director Richard Helms as a witness, once said of intelligence agencies, "You don't think they'd lie to me, do you? I've been working with those people for twenty years."

Blakey has also been dealing with organized crime for 20 years—from the right side of the fence. A former Special Prosecutor in Robert Kennedy's strike force on organized crime, and until last summer the director of Cornell's Institute on Organized Crime, he has enjoyed a reputation as a crusader against racketeers. But in February 1976, he seemed to switch sides, and some staffers are wondering why. The occasion was the celebrated *Rancho La Costa v. Penthouse Magazine* suit, the largest such libel action ever. In an article on the California resort, *Penthouse* had alleged that La Costa had connections to organized crime; and La Costa's suit was widely regarded as a declaration of war by the alleged racketeers — Moe Dalitz among them—against the press. Blakey, in his 22-page affidavit, fired off several rounds in that war. He wrote: "My own view, based on my reading the article, the motion papers and my acquaintance with the vast popular and serious literature of organized crime, is that the La Costa article published by *Penthouse* is apparently a prime example of the counterproductive sensationalism serious specialists abhor. . . . It is clear to me that their good faith is seriously in question and that their conduct appears reckless in the extreme. Consequently, the action should properly go to trial."

By arguing on the side of alleged racketeers, rather than sitting on the sidelines in such a major suit, Blakey raises questions about his resolution in investigating organized-crime leads in the assassinations—questions not unlike those about his resolution in investigating the role of the CIA and the FBI.

—*Jerry Policoff* and *Wm. Scott Malone*